A brain drain or human capital flight

A brain drain or human capital flight, according to Wikipedia, is an emigration of trained and talented individuals ("human capital") to other nations or jurisdictions, due to conflicts, lack of opportunity, health hazards where they are living, discrimination or other reasons. It parallels the term "capital flight" which refers to financial capital that is no longer invested in the country where its owner lived and earned it. Investment in higher education is lost when a trained individual leaves and does not return. Some school of thoughts maintain that it’s most common for developing countries, where higher education and professional status is often embraced as the most secured path to escape from a beleaguered economy or political instability. Much has been written about the brain drain in Africa.

The idea is that young professionals who have been costly to train move to, and thereby benefit, western countries by pursuing careers away abroad. Valuable intellectual capital and tax revenue is supposedly lost in this manner. It’s an almost common topic. Every year, thousands of qualified doctors, lawyers, architects and other professionals leave Africa for the west. They are tempted by significantly higher wages and brighter prospects. But this brain drain is costing Africa dear. The departure of qualified professionals leaves the continent poorer, and holds back development. Universities turn out graduates, only to see them take their skills abroad. This phenomenon is perhaps most problematic for developing nations, where it is widespread. In these countries, higher education and professional certification are often viewed as the surest path to escape from a troubled economy or difficult political situation. I want to take this subject from
another perspective. Is there really a brain drain? What this question asks in effect is, whether Africa has been devoid of human resources, in terms of qualified professionals or whether it has in fact become over bloated with more than enough qualified professionals that are looking towards making more money by embracing the opportunity the west offers.

A blogger, Arty, says, ‘If You Think Africa is Suffering From a Brain Drain, Your Brain is Drained’ Infact in his exact words, ‘I am getting sick and tired of this knee-jerk, sanctimonious and yes, stupid Africa-is-suffering-from-a-brain-drain argument’ Strongly enough, he based his arguments on the premise of remittances being sent back home from relatives, friends, brothers, sisters and the likes plying their trades abroad. According to his estimates, it runs into billions of dollars annually. In effect, he is of the opinion that the so called African brain drain is indeed a blessing in disguise and should be applauded rather than castigated. However, the Nigerian born Microsoft icon, Philip Emeagwali, was of a different opinion. He reiterated that out of every $300 an African living in the United States sends home to his relatives, $12,000 per month is made for the US economy. According to the computer guru, Money alone cannot eliminate poverty in Africa, because even one million dollars is a number with no intrinsic value.

The issue that should be addressed should be whether African is the best or the worst for it by the rampant fleeing of its highly skilled Nationals to western countries in search of greener pastures. I am of the belief that, under the status quo, Africa would still remain poor even if all the money in the world should be sent there. Money cannot teach your children. Teachers can. Money cannot bring electricity to your home. Engineers can. Money cannot cure sick people. Doctors can. Because it is only a nation’s human capital that can be converted into real wealth, that human capital is much more valuable than its financial capital.

A few years ago, Zambia had 1,600 medical doctors. Today, Zambia has only 400 medical doctors. Kenya retains only 10% of the nurses and doctors trained there. A similar story is told from South Africa to Ghana.

In Nigeria, the petroleum industry hires about 1,000 skilled expatriates, even though we can find similar skills within the African Diaspora. Instead of developing its own manpower resources, Nigeria prefers to contract out its oil exploration despite the staggeringly high price of having to concede 40% of its profits to foreign oil companies. Our African homelands have paid an extraordinary price for their lack of domestic technological knowledge. Because of that lack of knowledge, since it gained independence in 1960, Nigeria has relinquished 40% of its oilfields and $200 billion to American and European stockholders. Because of
that lack of knowledge, Nigeria exports crude petroleum, only to import refined petroleum. Because of that lack of knowledge, Africa exports raw steel, only to import cars that are essentially steel products. What an irony! Tufiakwa (God forbid), our elders will say:

“Knowledge is the engine that drives economic growth, and Africa cannot eliminate poverty without first increasing and nurturing its intellectual capital. Reversing the “brain drain” will increase Africa’s intellectual capital while also increasing its wealth in many, many different ways”.

The main question is that “Can the “brain drain” be reversed?”